

THE FALL AND RISE OF ORGANISING IN A BLUE-COLLAR UNION

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the growth of organising activity in a blue-collar, manufacturing union. It outlines the factors influencing the initial adoption of this philosophy in 1994, examines the reasons underlying the move away from this approach and the drivers that led to the subsequent return to the organising model in 1999. Based on an analysis of these changes the paper argues that the level of commitment and zeal of the unions' leadership is the crucial factor in determining the extent and culture of organising.

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INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s, the Australian union movement experienced a serious decline in membership density. A number of factors, including structural shifts in the economy, the rise of 'new right' economic tenets, changing employer attitudes and ideology, and the changing nature and needs of employees contributed to this decline. The strategic responses of the Australian union movement, articulated and implemented by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), centred initially on the Accord with the federal Labor government and, commencing in the late 1980s, a series of union amalgamations. However, by the early 1990s, with absolute membership as well as union density continuing to decline dramatically, the ACTU decided that these strategies were not the solution to membership decline. Thus, in 1993, it organised a delegation of union officials to visit a range of countries to examine the various strategies other union movements had employed to attack the increasingly widespread problem of declining membership. Members of the delegation were impressed with the activities of the union movement in the United States (US). The delegation saw parallels between the US and Australian union experience, noting that the US movement had faced similar problems during the 1970s and 1980s that Australian unions were facing in the 1990s (ACTU 1993). It was particularly impressed with the US movements' Organizing Institute, a specialised unit set up to recruit and train a "new breed of union organiser" (ACTU 1993, 6). Subsequently, the main recommendation of the delegation's report to the 1993 ACTU Congress was to establish a similar organisation in Australia, a recommendation accepted by Congress. In 1994, Organising Works (OW) was established by the ACTU as a strategic response to the decline in unionism in Australia. One of the key objectives of OW was to encourage ACTU affiliates to adopt an organising approach – building activist and involved memberships – rather than the traditional service model.

Over time, and strongly urged by the 1999 ACTU policy document unions@work, many unions have attempted to move towards what is now termed the organising model as a core part of a strategy to revitalise the union movement. Such an organising strategy is, of course, a major cultural change for unions. Surprisingly then, relatively little is known about the implementation of this strategy at the individual Branch level. In particular, what are the factors that have encouraged or inhibited the adoption of the organising model? This paper presents a case study of a union Branch that, in 1994, was one of the earliest unions to attempt to incorporate the organising philosophy into its operations. By 1996, however, the Branch had reverted to a servicing practice. Subsequently, in 1999, there was a second, more sustained and on-going attempt to introduce and utilise the organising approach. Thus, this case study provides an opportunity to assess the factors that caused both the demise and growth of the organising model.

The paper commences with an overview of the literature on the determinants of success of the organising model. Next, some data are provided on the case study union, followed by an outline of the attempts to inculcate the organising philosophy into the Branch culture. The findings from the case study are then utilised to assess the contentions in the literature. We argue that the role of the Branch leadership is the key factor in driving cultural change through the adoption of the organising model.

Methodology

This paper is based on information collected over a one year time period within one state Branch of a blue-collar union. The Branch is the largest within a national union with a combined membership of 90,000 in 2002. Both the Branch and the national union are overwhelmingly comprised of blue-collar manufacturing workers. The union is a product of a series of eight mergers, seven of which occurred between 1989 and 1994, resulting in wide industry coverage within the manufacturing sector. Data presented were collected through scrutiny of a wide variety of documents, including strategy documents, internal memos, industry profiles, training course packages and executive reports. A total of nine formal interviews, each of approximately 1 to 1.5 hours duration, were conducted with Branch officials and staff. In addition, a significant number of informal discussions were held with a range of union personnel. Interviewees included members of the organising teams, industrial officers, training officers and an organiser from the union's National office. Key personnel such as the Branch Secretary and the Lead Organiser were interviewed a number of times. Some of the interviewees had been employed in the Branch since the early 1990s, so a comprehensive picture of the past ten years of Branch activity was built up from combining interview information with analysis of historical documents.

Literature

Not surprisingly, much of the early literature on organising derives from the US. The wholesale application of this literature to the Australian context is not entirely appropriate, due to the cultural, social and political differences between the two countries. Nonetheless, keeping this qualifier in mind, the US literature does offer useful insights into the organising process, particularly when melded with later Australian studies.

The initial literature on organising presented somewhat differing views on the main ingredients that galvanised Branches into creating effective organising unions. However as the literature on organising has developed throughout the 1990s, various authors have combined these components to produce a fairly unified set of factors that are now generally accepted as the key components to successful union organising. These components are; the need for a sense of crisis in the Branch, strong leadership that supports organising, the fostering of a Branch culture that supports organising efforts and the active involvement of members in organising in their workplaces. We briefly discuss each of these factors.

Crisis

A number of writers identified a perception of crisis as necessary to, firstly, galvanise the Branch into making the changeover to the organising model, and, secondly, to continue the change process despite difficulties (Grabelsky and Hurd 1994). Oxenbridge (1997, 21) cites the onset of financial crisis in the union as "crucial" because usually "officials will only initiate change if it is seen as imperative". Macdonald et al. (1998) add to this by pointing out that it is not purely the magnitude of the crisis but the perception of crisis by the leader and members that determines how the Branch responds and how vigorously it adopts organising principles. They argue that such a perception in the union is the key to embracing the organising model (p.130). They also contend that the reverse holds true - a lack of perception of crisis means that the fuel to

adopt the organising model is not present (p.129). Similarly Sherman and Voss (2000) found that the more critical the crisis, the stronger was the commitment of the Branch to 'make organising work'. This heightened sense of emergency was often brought about through a combination of an external crisis, such as declining membership, and internal crisis, such as mismanagement which "gave rise to new leadership that was more committed to organising" (p. 99).

Leadership

A second key element in organising success is union leadership. Grabelsky and Hurd (1994, 96) assert that for the cultural change process to continue within the union Branches, it needs to be championed and driven by a strong leader to overcome the malaise of the traditional bureaucratic culture. Other authors concur that leaders who place a priority on organising are important for the programs success (Gapasin and Yates 1998, 96; Sherman and Voss 2000, 103). Oxenbridge points out that leadership support for change is vital due to the key fact that leaders determine resource allocation. This includes financial support as well as bestowing the "authority to drive change" on certain staff members (1997, 12). This style is described as 'transformational leadership' by Clarke (2000) who argues that the leader of a union has to be able to inspire and motivate people to voluntarily commit their time and energy to the union cause.

A number of writers have also identified certain leadership influences as creating barriers to achieving effective organisational change within a union. Fletcher (1998, 192) nominates 'traditional' union leadership as a barrier to achieving successful organising, arguing that the three major dangers to effective leadership of change are political concerns, a lack of managerial skills and political threat. Similarly, Grabelsky and Hurd (1994, 99) point out that if a leader talks of organising but does little to practically implement it, this can be most damaging, as the effect is to heighten scepticism amongst staff towards change itself. Pocock suggests that the existing union culture recreates and maintains a regressive group of officials, who, in effect, stymie change strategies from taking hold at the grass-roots level in the Branches (1998, 27). In this light, Bronfenbrenner et al argue that union Branches need "radical leaders" (1998, 25) who will be willing to risk the power and position of incumbency to strike out in new directions despite alienating loyal factional members. However a note of caution is sounded by Cooper (2001) who points out that a leader's ability to drive change is contingent on their leadership "legitimacy", that is, their power within the factional hierarchies and points out that "because unions are intensely political organizations, change does not necessarily follow directly from leadership edict" (2001, 432). In a similar vein, Heery (2002) observes that high-level leadership support is not enough to drive the organising agenda at the grass-roots level; rather this agenda must also be championed by Branch leaders (p. 403).

Culture

Pocock discusses the mechanisms of "factionalised struggles and protection of incumbents" (1998, 27) that can maintain a regressive group of officials and a particular culture in union Branches. A number of authors concur that often the existing union culture is the biggest inhibitor to changing policies and practice in Branches (Sherman and Voss, 2000, 6; Voss and Sherman, 2001, 25; Widenor and Feekin, 2001, 17; Yates, 2002, 664). Tillman and Cummings describe the normal state of trade unions as "top

down, bureaucratic, inefficient institutions that mirror the capitalist corporations which they purport to challenge" (1999, 269). Therefore there is widespread agreement that, for organising to work effectively as a means of revitalisation, there needs to be a profound change in the culture of the participating unions from a servicing tradition to an organising practice (Clarke, 2000, 146; Cooper and Walton, 1996, 14; Gapasin and Yates 1998, 79 - 83). However Oxenbridge introduces a note of caution about how the cultural change to organising is presented to union staff. A continual comparison of the organising with the servicing model, positioning the former as 'right' and the latter as 'wrong', only serves to alienate staff who may see this as devaluing many years of their previous work (1997, 11).

Membership Involvement

It is argued by a number of authors that the involvement of union members in organising activities is vital. This is to achieve both a real cultural conversion of the union movement (Tillman and Cummings 1999, 268; Fiorito et al 1995, 631; Clark 2000, 14) and increased membership numbers (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998, 35; Yates 2002, 35). However it is important to educate the members about the organising model (Grabelsky and Hurd, 1994, 100); otherwise members themselves will be "deeply mistrustful of membership recruitment, fearing a loss of membership services as resources are diverted into organising or a change in union culture" (Yates 2000, 664). However, some unions may be more suited to the adoption of the organising culture than others. Factors to be taken into account here are: the amount of resources they have committed in the past to education of members and creation of workplace structures (Oxenbridge 1997, 20); and existing "membership orientation" (Gahan and Bell 1999, 15). This raises the issue that perhaps the organising model may not be the best strategy for all Branches. Indeed, far from the organising model being the goal towards which all unions should strive, the right strategy depends on correctly ascertaining the needs of the members. Therefore, traditional strategies may not necessarily be outmoded and new, innovative organising strategies are not necessarily the preferred option (Gahan and Bell 1999, 15).

Overall, there now appears to be some degree of unanimity in the literature that some combination of four distinct factors – a crisis in the Branch, Branch cultural change, appropriate leadership and membership participation – are the components for 'organising success'. We now examine an attempt to introduce the organising philosophy into one state-based Branch of a blue-collar manufacturing union and assess the influence of these four factors on the implementation of organising in practice.

Initial Organising

In 1993, the union's National Secretary sent an industrial officer on the original ACTU-led mission to visit the Organizing Institute in the US. The positive reports of this trip from the delegation convinced the National Secretary that organising was an innovative new method that was worth investing resources into, to see if it would work in his union. The National Secretary, in turn, convinced the State Secretary of one of the larger Branches, which had suffered a steady reduction of Branch membership during the 1990s, to sponsor four Organising Works (OW) trainees in the first OW course run in Australia in 1994. Subsequently, on their graduation from this course, these trainees were hired to form the basis of a small organising group. They established their own

network, and traded tips and knowledge from the field, thus supporting each other as a team. Despite the unfamiliar culture of the union office and lack of guidance from more established colleagues, these graduates were successful in recruiting approximately nine hundred new members during 1995, a significant achievement in their first year of operations.

After the first two years, however, the initial spurt of organising activity slowed down. Three inter-related factors explain this decrease: the then current emphasis on mergers as the major strategic response to declining membership, the growth of enterprise bargaining, and Branch culture. Although there was some perception of a membership density crisis during the early 1990s, and a recognition that 'something had to be done' to turn the tide of membership decline, the original organising initiative was not seen as the major strategic response. In common with many other Australian unions, the Branch had already instituted structural changes through a series of mergers - seven mergers between 1989 and 1994, the same year that the first OW graduates were hired. The years after 1994 were seen as years of consolidation after these mergers, and although membership decline was alarming, the core solution was seen to be a focus on integrating the merger partners and strengthening the Branch internally, rather than on organising:

It's probably fair to say that we didn't understand how big the crisis was. Back then (early 1990s), we saw membership dropping but we didn't think it would continue like it did. We thought if we tightened up our servicing and nailed down the amalgamations, we would keep members loyal. We didn't realise how many redundancies there were going to be in the following years. Some workplaces cut staff by up to 50 per cent. I must admit, also, I think a lot of unionists thought organising was just all bullshit back then (Branch Secretary, 2001).

During the mid-1990s, the new system of enterprise bargaining grew in importance. Although this was perceived by some unions as a blow to their way of operating, this union responded in an opportunistic manner. The Branch developed a strategy to institute strong and detailed collective agreements that collected all the previous agreements with a particular employer into one document, and then to bargain for that document with the employer on a regular basis. During 1996, in pursuit of this bargaining strategy, a number of the original 1994 organising graduates were seconded from organising to fill servicing roles. These roles included creating and systematising enterprise bargaining agreements, as well as acting as industrial officers to represent the union members in the enterprise bargaining process to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. The message to the young OW graduates was quite clear: servicing had a higher priority than organising. By 1997, the original four organisers had left organising and moved into higher paid, more prestigious servicing roles.

Branch culture was the third factor militating against the organising model. As noted earlier, the Branch was in a state of flux during the first half of the 1990s. It had experienced seven mergers during the half of the 1990s and the final, eighth occurred in 1998. This series of mergers brought a raft of problems to the union, not the least of which was the need to integrate disparate cultures. The then Branch Secretary believed that, to minimise disruption, he needed to quickly integrate these new colleagues into the existing Branch culture. The common thread amongst the different groups was that they had all operated within traditional, servicing cultures. Thus, it was easier to create Branch cohesion through continuing to use the servicing culture as a

stable base, rather than try to embark on a fundamental change in culture and practice during a time when officers and officials had already experienced significant uncertainty in their job roles. For the Branch to embark on a transformation to an organising culture would have clearly been difficult considering the disparate and highly fragmented internal culture that already existed.

These three developments combined to ensure the effective demise of organising activity. Between 1997 and 1999, the Branch continued to recruit one or two new Organising Works graduates a year, but very little actual organising activity was undertaken. Some significant driver of change was needed to re-ignite organising.

The Second Coming

In 1999, a new Branch Secretary was elected. This official was overtly committed to the organising agenda, having been the original union official on the delegation to the Organizing Institute in the USA in 1993. He immediately moved to implement an organising model:

When I became Secretary of the Branch a couple of years ago, we made a conscious decision to have a proper go at organising (Branch Secretary, 2001).

He arranged a day of training for the whole Branch. This had quite a pivotal effect on some of the early organising works graduates, still working in the Branch but in servicing roles: "I realised how much I had become adsorbed into the servicing culture, you get gradually pulled off focus and you don't even notice it. This day refocussed me on organising" (Organiser, 2002). Subsequently, The Branch Secretary created an Organising Unit. He appointed a Lead Organiser from one of the original four OW graduates taken on by the Branch in 1994, attracted a number of experienced organisers still within the Branch back into organising by raising the remuneration and profile of the organising role, and began sponsoring and hiring new OW graduates each year. The Lead Organiser role has been to:

Make sure the team gets the support they need, so there is a clear strategy for the team to follow, and so they are not just running around like headless chooks, banging on doors. When they get to a company they have certain procedures they go through, they know what they are going to say and what they want to achieve (Branch Secretary 2001).

The System in Operation

The organising system follows two main strategies, loosely identifiable as external organising and internal organising. In external organising there are three ways in which opportunities are identified: first, through leads received via the union Communications Centre; second, by using an 'industry plan' to research gaps in membership by industry and workplace; and, third, from 'greenfield' sites. In the 'Comms Centre' there is an organising staff member, along with the usual servicing staff. If a call is received from someone who is not in the union, but wants to enquire about membership, it will be dealt with by a trained OW person. The Comms Centre shows how organising and servicing attempt to complement each other.

It's common to get four to five strong leads per week from the Comms Centre. And these are our best leads because they are red-hot. Because someone has made the effort and there has probably been discussion at the workplace, so there is interest already (Comms Centre Organiser, 2002).

These calls are logged by the OW person in the Comms Centre and passed on to the lead organiser who then assigns the 'job' to one of the organisers in the team. The benefit of a formal communications centre is that the leads are recorded at a central point and can be linked to past organising activity at that site. Also the organiser can increasingly draw on a second source of data, a relevant industry profile for the workplace in question to gain an overview of the awards and conditions in that industry before visiting the site. These industry plans, to use the union term, are being developed to assist in future organising campaigns and focus on selected sub-sectors within an industry. The lead organiser explained the process:

This industry plan might not be actioned for ages, because you have to run with the hot issues which are on your plate first, but we always go back to them. In time, they have become the bedrock of our organising. If one of our organisers is off to a new site, I say, check the industry plan first (Lead Organiser, 2002).

The third external organising strategy focuses on 'greenfield' sites - new factories or plants that a company is starting up. The company usually has other unionised sites, so discussions are held to organise an Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) from the onset. This means that a registered agreement is in place before the new plant or warehouse is opened. The Branch will usually only agree to a one-year EBA timeframe, which achieves basic award coverage for employees and gives the Branch time to set up delegate structures in the workplace, as a longer term agreement often discouraged active membership from developing at the site:

Traditionally we would have gone and done the EBA, and then said "look what a great job we've done", and then ask people to join the union because that's the right thing to do. But people wouldn't join because they've already got their agreement and it was fixed for 3 or so years, so they couldn't have any say in the process. So now we only negotiate a one year agreement, because this gives us an organising opportunity, allows us to involve the members (Lead Organiser, 2002).

The organisers work on these new sites until they have signed up a majority of the workers as members. They then gradually reduce their visits to the site, but still assist the servicing officer to negotiate the EBA so that there is not an abrupt end their contact. After the handover is complete, servicing officers rely more on delegates to sign up additional workers, as they usually have 70-100 sites to cover, and so, on average, would not be available to visit as frequently as the organiser did.

Turning the focus to internal organising, to attempt to increase density in an already-unionised organisation the Organising Unit also attempts to link its strategy to the bargaining process. The chosen site would already be part of the established territory of an existing servicing official from the union. The organiser works closely with the servicing officers to identify enterprise agreements due to expire over the next year and they begin to organise at these workplaces some three to six months prior to expiry.

We took EBA as a way of reigniting the membership where some unions had not done much. We told members that the shop would need to be 100 per cent if they were going to keep their wages and conditions. It sort of re-energised our campaigns. It's a cutthroat industry; the only way to get the best deal is to stick together. And it does make a big difference when you're negotiating with an employer if you have thirty per cent or sixty per cent of the workers as members (Organiser, 2002).

The team has tracked membership density over the period of the campaign at one particular site and found that it increased from forty percent to approximately seventy percent by the end of the EBA process, and then settled at about sixty percent, six to twelve months after the campaign; a relatively good outcome for organising. Obviously, a more acid test would be to track membership density over a more prolonged period, say one to two years, but so far this has not occurred.

Other Initiatives

Since 1999, as well as establishing, staffing and funding the Organising Unit the Branch Secretary has pursued a number of organising initiatives or responded to suggestions from organisers as part of an attempt to change the Branch culture. We offer four such examples. First, when organisers argued that low membership in a new industry sector with high casual staff was partially due to casual workers not being happy with a fixed membership fee the Secretary approved a new, flexible fee structure. Second, the Branch Secretary has been careful not to limit the assessment criteria for organisers to recruitment outcomes:

It can't just be about numbers. But if you look at it purely economically, they don't have to sign up too many to recoup their cost. But the focus can't just be on this as the culture of the group would then all be about numbers and not about what they leave behind. I don't want officials just running around getting numbers (Branch Secretary, 2001).

Third, the Branch Secretary has recognised the need to place the status of the organising role on par with that of servicing, so that it is not seen as simply a 'start up' position for young graduates who wish to move up the ladder and into other roles. In doing this, however, he has had to be careful not to alienate long-standing servicing officials, and imply that they have not been performing their job properly. Rather, the culture of the Branch has been influenced by the recognition of organising as a career path in its own right:

It's not just remuneration, but also status within the organisation. The organiser shouldn't expect to get into the union and then from day one to be on the same level as senior people. But I am keen that once they have shown they can perform competently within a period, say two or three years, their status should be no different to other officials (Branch Secretary, 2002).

Fourth, an activity in the Branch that was minor, but high profile, was the re-designing of the general benefits brochure, which is circulated to potential members. This originally advertised the key features of joining the union as access to cheap home loans and other financial benefits. Now it promotes the strong industrial representation of the union, and reinforcing the message that the union will gain its power from the collective strength of its members. Taking on this task reinforced the importance of the organising

group, demonstrating that the organising approach was ideologically sanctioned by the leader.

Overall, organising activity has undergone a major revival since 1999. However, the recent late-2002 Branch elections showed that the necessary change in culture had not permeated throughout the Branch. A small group of servicing officers still wedded to the traditional model, and basing their campaign around this issue challenged the Secretary and his team in a particularly heated and strongly contested election. However, the outcome of the election was overwhelmingly in support of the existing Branch Secretary and his platform. In some respects, the election has been a positive process for the Branch, as it provided a forum for officials to openly air their opposition to the leader's mandate and to leave the Branch after their defeat:

With the 'old guard' officials that were here, whenever we presented organising at our conferences or councils, they would all step up and bag it and say it was bullshit. That's where the election was a healthy process, it got it all out on the table, and now that we've got the mandate from the members, we can move on (Lead Organiser, 2002).

However the abrupt departure of these officials from the Branch post election has unfortunately left the leader in the position of "scrambling around looking for people to fill those places" (Branch Secretary, 2002). The possibility of giving some officials both organising and servicing responsibilities was rejected by the Branch Secretary:

I don't think you can do both organising and servicing. If an official is currently looking after 2,000 members, and if I cut that down and said they could look after 1,000, and then spend the other 50 per cent of their time organising new sites, in six months they would be spending all their time on servicing those 1,000 members. It's just the nature of the work. So unless you have dedicated resources on organising, then you are not fair dinkum about it (Branch Secretary, 2002).

As the only group with a sufficient level of experience and without existing geographical responsibilities is the organising team, the easy solution has been to poach members from there. Two members of the team have moved across to fill the vacant servicing roles and two other team members left the Branch. The team leader has also moved into a different role within the Branch and a new team leader has been appointed as a replacement. Two new organising team members have been appointed, and are also currently undergoing OW training. Accordingly, the new Organising Unit team comprises of two previous team members, two new team members and a new team leader.

The success of the Branch Secretary's election platform seems to have hinged on the members widespread acceptance of the organising agenda, achieved through the Secretary's willingness to present and openly debate the message of organising. However, he acknowledges that getting the message across to delegates, let alone members, is not an easy task, and that this Branch has only made small inroads into this area:

With members, mass meetings are a very limited window of opportunity, and how many are paying attention, if you get into any detail, how many have tuned out,

and what percentage don't care anyway? So it is more capitalising on every opportunity we have to get members and delegates together, such as the recent union picnic day (Branch Secretary, 2002).

To overcome this the Branch Secretary has held delegate meetings twice yearly, along with regular industry-specific meetings. In these he has outlined the importance of organising:

I don't use the organising jargon, but they get it. I take them through the problem of the non unionised sectors of the industry where wages are a lot lower and pose the question, well, what are you going to do about it? They quickly understand that their union has a role to play to do something about it, so that's why not all the resources can be on just servicing their needs. And it's not a hard argument to get across (Branch Secretary, 2002).

However the Secretary understands that more needs to be done here:

We still have to remind the members that we're not the RACV [an organisation providing motor vehicle breakdown services to its members] and it's going to take years and years to change this. But if we keep hammering away it will get through to these people. If they do have problems on site, we prefer to train the delegates so they can deal with it, rather than calling in an organiser. So I have to make sure our delegates get this training. But they need the confidence to do this. We have some sites that are highly organised, to the extent that they would be insulted if we brought in an organiser to help them. They take pride in being independent. But others are different and need more support (Branch Secretary, 2001).

There are also plans to capitalise on the more substantial opportunity of union training courses. However, it is not easy to incorporate organising principles into delegate training courses, let alone expect delegates to then "sell" the organising model to their members. A major problem is that the usual delegate training course is of a short duration, which limits the amount of material the trainer is able to cover:

The difficulty is that in a three day course, you can only introduce the organising principles, you can't do any more. And they are quite complex skills, so they are quite difficult to learn. Also, to learn a new skill, you need to reinforce it, and it's difficult if you have no follow up. Most delegates are more comfortable with being taught certain 'tasks', such as how to look up information on their award, but when you get to teaching 'skills', like how to talk to potential members, they can feel insulted. You are trying to teach them a whole new way of interacting with people and their response can be "well this is just me and this is how I talk to people, I'm not going to change that" (Trainer, 2002).

In this environment, the Branch has decided to offer, in addition to the official training courses, small informal training sessions with groups of new delegates. These sessions would be conducted by an organiser, be on site, be approximately half an hour in length and held during a lunch break. Topics suggested for these sessions are: understanding collectivism, handling objections, one-to-one communication and mapping the workplace. In addition discussions are underway to create a union education fund in future enterprise agreements, so that delegate education can be further extended.

Discussion

Despite being one of the earliest unions to recruit OW graduates, the Branch's initial focus on organising soon dissipated. The failure of this first wave of organising was followed by a resurgence of the organising philosophy from 1999 onwards. This section of the paper examines the influence of the key factors identified in the literature on both these developments: perception of crisis, level of leadership support, cultural change in the Branch and membership participation in organising.

Explaining the Fall

We noted earlier the role of union mergers and the growth of enterprise bargaining as factors influencing the decrease in organising. Underlying the impact of these developments were the key roles of two of the factors identified in the literature - a lack of committed leadership and failure to attack, less alone change, Branch culture. There is some indication that the then Secretary was aware that the Branch was facing a crisis. In common with most officials of other unions, he did not, however, fully appreciate the extent of the crisis facing the union movement. It appears that he believed a sufficient response was to get the Branch 'house in order' through absorbing the amalgamated groups into a strong, unified Branch culture based around the traditional servicing model with which most were familiar. The political nature of contesting elections means that, invariably, for the leader to introduce a new organising culture would mean alienating key servicing personnel, who could have well been his support base to win the position. Thus, to consolidate the amalgamations, organising was not pursued seriously. Arguably, this could be considered the sensible thing to do, but, nevertheless, it effectively de-railed the necessary Branch cultural shift towards the organising mentality. Consequently the Branch leadership simply did not place a major emphasis on organising.

The then Branch Secretary also did little to integrate the organising team into the existing structure of the Branch, or to even attempt to vary the existing culture. Rather, he made servicing the enterprise bargaining process his core strategy by re-directing resources towards this goal. Servicing staff were rewarded with better pay and conditions, and organising staff were left without mentors or careers. Organising plans were simply not developed. Overall, although organising was very vocally supported by the National Secretary, the Branch Secretary was not committed to the same agenda. This divergence highlights the difficulty of driving an agenda that requires change of attitude and practice within an organisation, from a distance. The National office did not have any direct control over the state Branches, it could recommend policy initiatives, but not enforce them. Thus, although there was the highest leadership support for the organising push, the day-to-day reinforcement for the model was absent, and so it became overwhelmed by other, more immediate concerns.

A related factor was that the original 1994 Organising Works graduates were not formally assigned mentors within the Branch. Without mentorship by senior Branch officials, their activities were viewed as a sideline activity, and not taken seriously. A first major consequence was that after the initial group of organisers moved into servicing roles, later OW graduates had nobody to learn from, and so a working knowledge of organising in the Branch was neither established nor transferred. Their initiatives and efforts, although yielding impressive membership results at times, were scattered and not part of any centralised strategy. Consequently, by 1996, the 'easy'

leads had begun to dry up and there was not a clear path laid out for future organising work.

It takes a lot more planning, focus and leadership to get organising working, and making sure the new organisers focus on the job at hand. You also have to make sure they have a clear plan to follow, with realistic targets, and that the people doing the work feel they are genuinely an integral part of the organisation, and not just an add-on bunch of young kids, which happened originally (Branch Secretary, 2002).

A second major consequence was that these new graduates were ill-equipped to handle the hostility of seasoned industrial officers towards their new way of doing business. Indeed some of the older officers viewed the new organising push as an insult to their capabilities, that their years of experience and knowledge was being superseded by these new organisers and the organising rhetoric of the ACTU:

Originally we thought the new ones were smart arses. We didn't want those young pricks coming in here telling us how to suck eggs. We'd been doing this job for years and they thought they could tell us how to do it better (Industrial Officer, 2002).

An external factor that drew attention away from organising in the Branch was an increase in the amount of enterprise bargaining. During 1996, in pursuit of this bargaining strategy, a number of the original 1994 organising graduates were seconded from organising to fill servicing roles. These roles included creating and systematising enterprise bargaining agreements, as well as acting as industrial officers to represent the union members in the enterprise bargaining process to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. The message to the young OW graduates was quite clear: servicing had a higher priority than organising.

Finally, one of the most important factors in preserving a servicing culture was the support of members for the existing status quo. No attempt was made to explain to members the need to move to an organising model. This is not surprising given that many senior Branch officials were not themselves convinced of this need and were quite happy to continue receiving a service. For many years members had been provided with an industrial officer who would answer their queries and take on their battle for them. They did not wish to give this up, and take on this workload themselves, especially when the need for change was not immediately apparent, and has not been discussed with them.

Overall, therefore, without strong leadership support and facing a hostile culture, the organising model was unlikely to succeed. In practice, none of the factors for success identified in the literature existed. So why did the Branch Secretary hire organising graduates in the first instance? It most certainly appears to be due to the prompting of the National Secretary. However, it was unlikely that either of these officials realised the extent of structural and cultural change required to implement the organising model. Regardless, during the period 1994 to 1999, little member participation in organising in this Branch, an internal emphasis on servicing priorities, a lack of enthusiasm for the organising cause displayed by the leader and only a gradually developing cognition of crisis, all combined to effectively stymie the organising agenda.

Explaining the Rise

The appointment of a new Branch Secretary in 1999 opened the way for renewed emphasis on organising. This new Secretary had previously been a servicing officer within the same Branch, and saw first-hand how the previous strategic response to crisis had failed to halt membership decline. He was also aware of the increasingly steep decline in union membership generally, and thus realised that far more significant steps were needed to successfully overcome membership decreases. In short, he recognised the dimensions of the crisis and set about developing the organising framework as his main strategic response to this. Further, it appears that he communicated this sense of crisis, and urgent need for response, to his team by instituting a training session for the whole Branch on organising, sending individual officers on OW short courses and changing the pay structures to recognise the important part organising plays in Branch success. Thus, and in contrast to their absence under the previous regime, two key factors - the sense of crisis and supportive leadership - were immediately present.

Importantly, this leadership was in a position of control over the day to day operation of the organising unit, and the interaction of that unit to other areas of the Branch. In contrast, while the National leader had been supportive of organising during the early-to mid-1990s, his influence was too far removed to be effective in changing the culture of this particular Branch. It was only when the immediate leader, the Branch Secretary, supported the cultural change that changes started to emerge. This 'everyday' support is vital to cultural change, and is evidenced in the leader changing membership fees and sanctioning high profile activities such as the redesigning of membership brochures around an organising message. Indeed, an even more detailed level of management was instituted in the appointment of an experienced organiser as Team Leader to micro-manage the group's day to day organising activities. This has included such activities as assigning follow up on Comms Centre leads, setting priorities on campaigns, tracking the progress of sites, linking organising and servicing personnel within the Branch, mentoring newer members of the team, and connecting organising campaigns with other activities in the industry.

As outlined by Oxenbridge (1997) it is important to effect positive cultural change within the organisation, without alienating long-standing staff. However for organising to be valued, it is also important to recognise and reward its practice. Therefore, it has been a delicate balance for the leader to promote organising, but not denigrate servicing, which has been practiced by many long standing staff. This problem is exacerbated if you have a number of older staff:

It is hard for someone who has done the job a certain way for 40 years to be told they have to do things differently. But we try to make it as least dramatic as we can. It's about trying to get more people involved in sites. Get them to support delegates, and come along to the union training, so that when next the boss looks at someone sideways they don't have to run out there and tell him off (Branch Secretary, 2002).

Although the leader has been openly encouraging of organising and has spearheaded this agenda since 1999, the hostility shown by some officials towards the organising platform during the recent election highlights just how slowly cultural change takes place, and the challenges inherent in trying to effect change. The changing of a group

culture is thus a delicate and dangerous one, as it can result in recalcitrant elements wishing to undermine the leadership. It takes a strong and capable leader to overcome these challenges. However, with the departure of these unenthusiastic officials, a Branch culture more confidently and more fully focused on organising could emerge in the future.

The literature, as noted above, strongly argues the need to present the organising message clearly and completely to members. Ultimately, the success of organising in the Australian union movement depends on the acceptance, indeed the championing of the program, by its members; and the message of what organising is can easily be misunderstood, or distorted by a partial view of its methods. Therefore perhaps the most important activity to contribute to the members apparent acceptance of the organising agenda, as indicated by the election results, has been the leaders willingness to present and openly debate the message of organising in delegate forums and industry-specific meetings. However the Secretary admits that there needs to be much more done in this area. Tactics such as the use of delegate forums and including organising in training sessions have gone some way to educating shop stewards. Re-designing delegate training packages, and the membership brochure to reflect the core value of organising unionism, is also presenting the case for an organising model to its members. The Secretary understands that this is not an overnight conversion of members, and something that will "take years of reinforcement".

Some authors suggest that such a top-down approach to spreading the organising message is not desirable. For example, in Australia, Gahan and Bell (1999, 15) caution that the organising model should only be adopted when it is understood and supported by the members. However, such a textbook approach is simply not feasible in practice. We have already noted the lengthy time periods involved in changing the culture and views of middle- and lower-ranking officials. Educating members to fully appreciate and support the organising model would likely take a number of years; and in the meantime the union would be severely, if not mortally, wounded. In the environment of the mid- to late-1990s, an initial top-down process was inevitable; over the longer term, real membership support for organising is vital. However, the membership crisis in Australian unionism, allied with the traditional low levels of union workplace structures and thus low membership involvement, has so far necessitated a top-down approach.

Drawing together this discussion, it would appear that the initial attempt to introduce the organising philosophy in 1994 was probably doomed. There was some recognition of crisis within the Branch but the organising framework was not identified as the necessary response; the existing leadership did not, by its actions, support its organisers; and the dominant culture remained the service mentality. In contrast, all of these factors changed in the late 1990s, with the election of a new leadership structure. Based on the literature, this Branch has achieved at least two of the four main 'ingredients for success': it has identified and reacted to a crisis and has strong, supportive leadership. Following the recent election, and the affirmation of the existing leadership with its support for organising, the Branch is well on the way to achieving cultural change. Further and again driven by the leadership, it is now commencing on the fourth ingredient - enlisting the support of its members by presenting them with the organising message. Success here is vital to completion of the transformation to an organising model.

So, taking an overall view, can this Branch currently be called an 'organising Branch'? Arguably, because the members involvement in organising has only recently begun, and because cultural change in the Branch is still underway, it is more accurate to see this as a Branch that 'does' organising, but it is not yet an 'organising Branch' as such. When the organising principles are put in place for and by the members, then the cultural transformation will be complete. Until that time, this Branch is practicing organising more than other Branches, but is still in the process of evolving towards an organising model. The leadership has moved the Branch significantly further towards organising practice than most Australian unions, and with the recent electoral mandate given to the Branch Secretary; the impetus is clearly there to continue the journey. The next few years will determine if the Branch completes the transformation to a fully organising model, or steps back into a comfortable half-way situation of being a traditional servicing union that also does some organising.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined and analysed two attempts to introduce an organising philosophy into a blue-collar manufacturing union. The first attempt failed to have any significant impact on the union and, after a two-year period, gradually faded away. The second attempt commenced in 1999 and remains on-going; the philosophy is now clearly embedded within the core of the union and a successful change in the culture of the union is in progress. What factors explain these changes? Arguably, the key factor is leadership. The lack of leadership support during the first attempt effectively scuttled a promising initiative. Equally, strong leadership support during the second attempt has been vital to the growth of the organising philosophy. We do not discount the future challenges posed by factors such as additional cultural change and, arguably the greatest challenge of all, getting the membership to accept the organising philosophy. However, in this case study it was the Branch leadership that recognised and drove the need for change, which seems likely to be the foundation stone for additional Branch and membership cultural change.

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